

The “Graying of Nudism” is Only Part of the Problem

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In the Winter 2003 issue of N, author Jim Meyer observed in his article *Old News* that the Naturist Movement, per se, in both United States and abroad, is starting to show its age – literally. Over the past ten years there has been a noticeable decline in new members under age the age of 30 for both AANR and the Naturist Society, and he concludes that both could be in danger once the Baby-Boomer generation of the 1950’s and 1960’s retire from the scene.

In my view, the so-called “Graying of Nudism in America” is just a part of a worldwide “Graying of Every Institution,” as the Baby-Boomer Generation (born between 1946 and 1962) prepare for retirement over the next 20 years. Governmental and charitable institutions are already struggling with the question of how to survive when this population changes status from donors to receivers.

Yet of equal importance, I see also several other equally profound changes occurring that will affect the future of naturism just as surely as the aging question. To survive, naturist organizations will need to understand how these social and economic changes will affect their favorite destination resorts, local clubs, paid memberships and in general providing perceived value that cannot be found elsewhere.

I shall divide this article into three parts: global trends for the next decade that I see impacting our society-as-a-whole that will also affect the naturist movement, issues and trends within just the naturist movement that need resolution, and finally, some of my suggestions for resolving some of these problems.

I. Global Trends that Will Affect Everyone, Including Naturists

1. **A Decline in Volunteerism.** A recent survey published by the US Department of Commerce, and other sources cited in the N article last issue show that during since 1990, there has been a noticeable decline in both formal membership and volunteer participation in many traditional social activities as churches, scouting, and service clubs of various kinds. These used to attract large numbers of younger participants (only soccer continues to grow in popularity.) This decline also as resulted in declining revenues, so that charities are having to scramble to find enough donors to maintain levels of service. One of the reasons is the absolute need for two incomes in a working family to make ends meet, meaning there are fewer adults to volunteer and less discretionary income to contribute. Children are less likely to join if their parent isn’t home after school to encourage participation, and besides there is also heavy

competition from such modern babysitters as MTV and the Internet. Since the 9/11/01 tragedy, there is also an increased fear among adults and kids for outdoor group activities because of perceived danger from unseen criminals or terrorists. Every stranger with a smile is now a potential threat. Consequently there is less incentive to be a “joiner” in anything that requires one to move from the safety of the couch or keyboard. If the terrorist threat is perceived to lessen over the next few years some of this fear may dissipate but it appears 2-income families and Internet chat rooms are here to stay.

2. **The “Me-First” Baby Boomers Make the Rules.** Despite what TV executives believe, it is the “baby boomers” (ages 45-60) that still have the majority of the discretionary income in this country. But there is a lot less of it as a result of this last recession, so vacationers are picking their destinations more carefully and are traveling less often. As the Boomers continue to get older they seek out less active activities away from family resorts and the loud music of their own youth. “Couples” resorts in the Caribbean should see a tourist boom for the next 20 years. Even Mexico is opening its arms to nudists for the first time because of the potential for European tourist dollars. “Family” resorts for the under-35 age bracket may decline in numbers, as existing clubs redefine themselves into “Couples only” because that is where the dollars are.
3. **Underemployment for non-“Baby Boomers.”** The under 30 bracket has always been notoriously short on discretionary funds as income has rightfully gone toward affordable housing, food, and other survival priorities. As a result of this 2000-2003 jobs recessions, I have observed a widespread underemployment for the 20-somethings, more job turnover, and a lack of connection. Under the influence of television, movies, and peers, many have an “I’ll try anything once” attitude, be it recreational drugs, skinny dipping, or bunji-jumping. But its not enough to ski - you have to *hot-dog* ski! That need for an “adrenaline rush” is something that nudism has trouble providing, and I am not sure in this MTV world of “instant gratification” that anything will stick for very long in any case. Kids see “organization” as restrictive and un-spontaneous. It has not yet dawned on them that without organized efforts provided by naturist activists the places they now use for free could disappear – and sooner than later. This may not matter to many as they will just turn to the next spontaneous thrill instead and leave nudism behind without a second thought.

4. **Criminalization of Nudist Behavior.** Laws against nudity, once winked at, seemed to be enforced more and more by local law enforcement and prosecuting attorneys, making it more difficult to use public lands with confidence. It is especially risky to be seen nude with your own underage children or, God forbid, that you take photographs commemorating a family nude moment. It is well documented that many employees at such stores as WalMart will not only refuse to develop your nude photos but may also turn in the parents to the local police! The increase in youth rape cases be it by celebrities or church priests, also reinforce the public fear that our institutions are no longer safe, even if there is no evidence to support such fear.

Hence, we had the AANR youth camp controversy last year, which everyone should have seen coming way ahead of time. Naturists were placed in the uncomfortable position of trying to prove the impossible: saying with absolute certainty that there are not now, nor never have been, any pedophiles among us (may I add, but neither can the textile world prove that!) Not helping this perception are such television shows as Jerry Springer who seem to attract all the sexual exhibitionists in the country wanting 15 minutes of fame. These yokels seem to always be identified as “nudists!” We also have to live with the publicity generated by sexually-oriented social groups on the fringe of Naturism that reinforce in the public’s mind the mistaken belief that nudity is always foreplay.

5. **Loss of Privacy.** Unless you live in the middle of the country, the vast majority of city populations today live not in single-family houses but in an apartment or townhouse, where it is impossible to own a private Jacuzzi or even a small balcony private enough to sit in the sun sans clothes. If you are lucky enough to still own a home, a person is at risk attempting a little backyard nudity because the developers have built the houses so close together that you can shake your neighbor’s hand out the adjoining second-story windows!

Normally this should help the naturist movement because it forces people to go to a nude beach or resort to practice their lifestyle. However, many of the newest housing tracts are being built on or near beaches, deserts, or mountain areas traditionally used by naturists, as all the other in-city land has been developed. In these new tracts, there is always at least one non-naturists who is “appalled” that nudists are nearby and they complain to the local law enforcement. While we do win this fight more often than not, we also have lost some prized territory (families at Hippy Hollow, Texas, and Bates Beach in California come to mind.) I believe the net result is that many people simply are deciding to avoid the hassle of a potential ticket and staying in the privacy of their own homes to become non-participatory “closet” nudists instead (so long as they don’t take any photos!)

6. **The Unintended Effects of Technology.** Above I touched on the growing effect of the Internet as an alternative to participation in outside social activities, but there are other technology issues coming that will also impact all of our lives. Smaller and faster PDAs (hand-held, wireless personal data assistants) similar to today’s Palm will be the communication device of choice within five years with its combination of personal computer, cell phone and camcorder/digital camera. Just as network television is feeling the financial competition from 300 cable stations (one will not debate quality of what is seen here), so too naturism will feel the pressure to embrace some of these technological amenities because members of the future will insist on having them. What hotel does not offer its guests cable movies and a VCR these days?

However, allowing members and guests to remain connected to the outside world, if they choose to do so, will be expected just like the use of private CD players broke through the ban on music several years ago. So how will we restrict the use of built-in cameras in these devices with their potential to invade our privacy and those of our children? Do we ban all cell phones and all electronic devices that are the center of so many young people’s existence? No devices, fewer guests and kids. With devices, perhaps no families. The question should not be what do we not allow, but how can we turn this inevitability to our advantage?

7. **The Rise of Shame.** Last, this generation of teens and young adults is the first one to avoid showering at the end of gym class in most high schools across the country (thank you, ACLU and Ed Meese!) Therefore they have no experience with social nudity unless their parents practiced it at home or took them to a club or resort. This generation has been raised to be more ashamed of their bodies and may therefore be less inclined to try social skinny-dipping as they get older.

There is more skin on television, but there is always pixilation to cover whatever the network or local station perceives as “private parts.” This reinforces a sense of shame about the human body while at the same time it is attracting viewers to try to see “something naughty.” CBS’s Survivor and MTV’s Real World are recent examples of this titillation, and even cable has yet to allow anything but brief glimpses of male genitalia. We will never be accepted as long as the media is allowed to equate the naked form with naughty sex.

II. Issues Specific to the American Nudist Movement:

1. **The “Not My Problem” Mentality.** Statements such as “I work all week and I deserve some peace and quiet without responsibility” and “I worked hard to get where I am, let the next generation take care of itself” are typical of people with this attitude. No doubt some it has percolated down from that 70’s “Me-generation” mentality and passed into their Gen-X and Gen-Y offspring. But also I think a lot of this attitude problem is a response to the current social, political, and economic realities of a post-9/11 world discussed earlier.

A corollary to this is why younger people don’t formally join as members. I think it’s the old “why buy the cow when we can get the milk for free” story. They can go to a nude beach for free, so why pay money to join a club? Only when their beach is threatened, or it becomes too hard to hike up and down the cliffs to get there, or a “no nudity” sign suddenly appears at a favorite clothing-optional hot springs, then will we gain a receptive ear - maybe. Unless they just move on to bunji-jumping. Making this next generation of potential members sensitive to the issues at stake is going to take a lot of work from everybody.

2. **Naturism as a Political Wedge Issue.** Most of the regular nudist members I know are passive by nature – desiring only privacy to practice their chosen lifestyle – unless provoked. I have also seen – and many news stories seem to confirm—that local law enforcement usually no problem with nudists per se, in fact we keep the beaches cleaner and lower the crime rate wherever we settle. However, in many places in the country, we seeing the encroachment of land development into nudist areas coupled with pedophile-hysteria whipped up by some lone politician or other self-appointed community leader to use us as a convenient scapegoat to further their own agendas. It will continue to be a constant battle to separate ourselves against being labeled by the press and others as a lunatic fringe, often lumped together with the voyeurs, exhibitionists, and private social clubs who see nudity as foreplay. We need to have our calm and factual replies ready at all times, and we need more local speakers to communicate our message when the inevitable crisis occurs.

We are also our own worst enemy in one regard. I think organized naturism has deliberately avoided the fact that nudity can and does attract some undesirable fringe elements, from the dysfunctional voyeurs who’d rather watch and masturbate to the exhibitionists who love to perform in front of others. The idea that the joy of being without clothes is really an end to itself is not comprehensible to these people. Both management and parents expend countless hours every year making sure their resorts are safe from such people, and we are generally successful at keeping them out of our resorts.

But not completely, at least the first time they are there. The good news is there are do-not-admit lists to prevent second occurrences. The bad news is these lists are not communicated quickly enough between resorts and clubs. And the further bad news that on nude beaches and other public lands the ability to enforce these behavior policies often depends on if the nudist is bigger than the voyeur.

Ironically future successes at establishing areas for nudity also could be own undoing if future politicians see they can win votes by waving making people think nudists are a threat to the American Way of Life. Integration into the textiled local community to win friends and influence will be essential to protect us from such attacks. Join your local Chamber of Commerce and demonstrate that nudists are good for business!

3. **Fewer Traditional Clubs.** We are already seeing a decline in the number of clubs as their founding officers suffer burn-out or retire without having anyone of equal stature to replace them. (To be fair, this same “entrepreneurial disease” affects the non-nudist corporations as well.) I see new clubs forming, feeding off the members of the older clubs as they fail. The new clubs become more specialized in their activities. It remains to be seen if anyone will have the time, resources, or patience to tap into and nurture the college-age or early 20s crowd that are necessary for a new generation of leaders to arise before the older ones are no longer around. It may require the older clubs to **subsidize satellite clubs** of younger members who have their own activities and focus, but I have yet to hear of any clubs with the financial or political courage to attempt such a venture. My hope lies in the clubs that are focused on a specific beach, lake, or other nudist recreational location. These clubs will probably thrive because they are so focused, but with limited financial depth (remember the “cow” analysis.) They are also vulnerable to future encroachment by land developers and local political forces. I see these members and non-members being the people who eventually will feed the specialized and super resorts over the next decade.
4. **Fewer and More Specialized Resorts:** As the last of the generation of founding entrepreneurs retire we will begin to see their heirs have to make hard economic decisions whether to upgrade their services and infrastructure to keep pace with the “super clubs” or else sell out and close. It is not inconceivable to me that over half of the small to middle size nudist sites in the country could be gone within the next dozen years. Those that remain will have reinvented themselves into specialty markets, catering to the baby boomer couples, becoming health-centric spas, specific-sport centric (volleyball or tennis come to mind) or somehow discovering a way to attract the under-30 family and/or hip-hop single crowd (the ones with the money.) The “super-clubs” memberships will grow as the smaller clubs dwindle, but it will be a false conclusion to think

this economic bubble is going to last forever. First, even the super-clubs have to develop their next-generation of leaders, starting now. Second, in another dozen years, the Boomers will begin dying off, and the lack of current resort amenities for teens and those in their 20's will start to affect profit margins as this younger generation fails to participate in large numbers.

5. **The Naturist Fight Between Central and Populist Control.** In the Nineteenth Century, the Populist and Progressive Movements grew out of dissatisfaction with unregulated big business. The debate last year over the reorganization of ANNR was in the same tradition, and split the organization into two different philosophical camps:

- a. The Establishment, dominated by the larger resorts, who desired to see a centralized Board control resources and preserve much of the status quo, while
- b. The Populists, consisted of many local clubs and individual members who feared that further centralization would lead to a lack of services, poorer resource sharing, and a lack of policy flexibility to handle changing local markets.

My advice to both side: stop "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." It won't matter who "wins" in another dozen years if the issues discussed above aren't solved.

III. A Few Suggestions and Recommendations

Every club, resort, and national organization needs to ask itself two basic questions: (1) Does the Vision/Mission statement accurately convey why we exist TODAY and what we hope to achieve TOMORROW, not what we did a decade ago, and (2) To achieve that vision, what are we providing that cannot be found elsewhere and to whom do we wish to provide it? The answers to those questions will dictate our future as a movement in America, perhaps even in the world.

Let's assume the common answer is not "forget the next generation", but instead is something like "provide a healthy naturist environment to our current and future members." There are some specific suggestions I wish to put into the conversation:

1. The current naturist movement needs to expand its member base, period. Don't ignore any age bracket but realize that a long term success is measured by attracting the 25-40 year old bracket. I think it is a huge mistake to think what worked to attract people to social nudity in the 60's and 70's will still work today. Nudity then was about rebellion from established social rules, and so there was little marketing effort needed on the resort's part to "reel us in." What makes us think the current crop of nudist children and teens also won't

rebel against their parent's lifestyle? So understand our marketing efforts are going to be a much harder sell.

2. Realize that, even with all our efforts, most of the under-20 crowd will drop away for another decade as the pressures of growing up and moving out take priority. Some will trickle back in their early 20's bringing girl friends and boy friends if clubs and resorts provide something for them to do. But they are most likely to return via nude beaches and other open spaces because that is what they can afford.
3. I would propose that the smaller, struggling resorts begin specializing! While some may prefer to just cater to the aging baby boomers, another resorts nearby should focus on younger family and youth. Remember, most younger nudists think we're boring! Who wants to spend a day not splashing in a cold "healthy" pool with people 20 years older than yourself who are drinking beer and smoking and telling you to be quiet all the time? Hell, I'd rather be sitting at home alone on the Internet than endure that!
4. I believe it is a mistake to try to appeal to today's kids as a "summer camp without clothes" – that was attractive to our generation but is too structured and slow for Generation X and Y. From all that I read, today's 10-25 year olds want a "hang-out" area – water, dances, games, and internet-connected computer rooms—away from the over 30 crowd. Because those in their early 20's prefer to hang out with families and peers instead of people their grandparents' age, clubs needs to create separate events or activities that are attractive to the under-30 groups (be sure allow separate areas for the under 10 group, separate for young teens, separate from mid-teens, and separate from late teens as socially they have little in common with each other. This also may require separate pool areas or areas designated for one specific group or another.
5. Also, remember the typical baby-boomer's choice for music is as different between the generations now as it was between ourselves and our own parents so why impose a style of music on the assembly that pleases nobody? Schedule separate dance events, please! (Those catering to youth must be located in areas where music can be played loud without polluting the ear's of the old timer's or those of adjacent property-owners!)
6. While we're on the subject of dancing, until just a few years ago, dancing together nude was forbidden at many AANR resorts. What kind of a mixed message does that send to the younger crowd about nude not being lewd if we have to be dressed to dance?
7. Volleyball requires a lot of people all the time before it becomes part of a resort's culture. Tennis requires only two (or four) at a time. Unless your resort has a lot of courts (or you're lucky enough to be in the "in crowd"), you're probably out of luck getting to play consistently. Outsiders are usually the younger and newer members, so better create an inclusionary atmosphere!
8. Although this recommendation may be controversial to some, clubs and resorts may wish to change their

“Nudity Required” policies to “Clothing-Optional.” Having grown up in a clothing-optional resort (except for pool or Jacuzzi use), I saw the positive effects of not having that immediate pressure on kids and first-timers, and almost all eventually joined in during the course of a day’s visit. It attracts more first-time visitors – especially women and families—and also relieves the political pressure from the outside from politicians who think we are all as child-abusers. Purists will object, no doubt, and the topic is certainly one to discuss in a different article.

9. Another controversial issue that must be resolved is gender balance. It has been with us for 100 years and will probably never go away. By allowing single women entry but not single men we expose ourselves to possible future litigation. You can achieve better gender balance through creative price policies (see below.) Nudist policymakers must be made to realize it is not your gender but it’s the way you behave (there are women predators out there too!)
10. Resorts need to start allowing massage and other “health-spa” amenities at their sites to compete with non-nudist spas that are taking away Baby-Boomer dollars. Even better, creating workshops and teaching massage to the 20-somethings is even better as we will give them a possible income and built-in clientele in a nude environment.
11. Establish better and faster inter-club and inter-resort communications. This is critical when one discovers a predator has slipped through the front gate, so that he/she can immediately denied access to all other resorts and clubs. In an Internet world, there is no excuse not to do this immediately. We must have the courage to get passed the fear of litigation and do the right thing for our members and guests.
12. Adjust membership pricing to focus on the under-30 families and singles. At SCNA, we charge families the same rate as couples, in other words, the kids under 18 get in free to any event their parents want to bring them to. We also charge singles $\frac{3}{4}$ of the price of couples, to give them a financial incentive to bring someone along. It works! I suggest you give younger people deep discounts to just show up, or have them pay a special rate “by the event” or give a special \$5 day once a month. If you focus on 30-somethings with families be really sure the kids enjoy the experience and feel safe. If they kids are comfortable, rest assured the parents WILL be back!

In conclusion I believe it is every naturist member’s mission to find your replacement in the movement, and they must be under 30 or it doesn’t count. This is especially critical if you are a current club office or resort director. The important thing is we need to get off of our complacent baby-boomer butts and start doing something. Otherwise this 100-year old movement could literally see itself die out in another two or three generations.

I look forward to a continuing dialog on these subjects from other nudists and other clubs.

This was written and published in 2003 before the smart phone revolution accelerated everything. He writes here as a private citizen, his opinions are his own.